Nala & DAMAYANTI

and other stories from INDIAN MYTHOLOGY

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Nala & Damayanti

This is a Puranic story in which the principal character, a wise king, Nala, comes to grief through gambling. This story is related to Yudhistira in the ***Mahabharata*** *when he becomes the victim of a similar weakness.*

A long time ago, the aged king of Nishada decided to give up worldly life and retire to the forest. He crowned his son, the handsome Nala, the King of Nishada and went away to practise *vanaprastha*. The learned and virtuous Nala soon earned the respect of his subjects.

Nala had a brother, Pushkara, whose conduct was far from good. Pleasure-seeking and scheming, he had always felt that his brother was being given undue preference over him.

At the coronation, the evil Pushkara could barely contain his jealousy.

Said he: "Why should I be denied the status of king? In what way is Nala superior to me? I must find some way of depriving him of his position."

Pushkara's evil advisers asked him to exercise restraint.

"Don't do anything hasty, sire!" said one of them. "Now is not the time. When the opportunity presents itself, we will strike!"

Nala was blissfully unaware of his brother's evil designs. On being crowned king, he provided Pushkara with lavish apartments and all the luxuries that he himself enjoyed. He also gave him a position of responsibility in the state.

The neighbouring kingdom was ruled by King Bheema, who had a daughter called Damayanti. The princess possessed such exquisite beauty and wisdom that every king and royal worth his title wanted to marry her. King Nala was no exception. Although he had not met her, he developed a deep love for her.

"I must marry Damayanti," he thought, pining away for her day after day. "Without her, my life as a king is worthless. But how am I to convey to her how I feel? Even if I can, would she respond in the

Nala and the swan became good friends

in the way I wish?"

One day, the lonely king wandered about in his garden and stopped at the little pond in which swam the graceful royal swans. With thoughts only of Damayanti, Nala stared blankly at the birds. Suddenly, a strange sight arrested his wandering thoughts. Nala saw with utter disbelief that one of the swans was bedecked with plumes of such enchanting colour that it was almost golden.

"I have never seen a swan of such beauty! Has this one descended from heaven? And why, of all places, in Nishada?" wondered Nala.

He could not resist the temptation to possess this exquisite bird. He managed to reach for its neck and, without harming its tender body, took the swan in his hands. While the helpless bird did not reveal any outward signs of fear or sorrow, the other swans were distressed and wailed inconsolably. The scene shocked Nala. He knew birds and animals had feelings but had not imagined such deep emotions among them.

"Do not be afraid, lovely swan. I will not harm you in any way. I am the king and the protector of all who live in this land. It is my duty to take care of you!" said Nala.

The golden swan in turn reassured its mates, "Did you not hear the noble king? Give up your sorrow and anxieties. I know King Nala, he takes care of all living beings. Maybe I could be of some service to him. I will certainly return to join all of you as soon as possible. Have faith and patience."

Nala was struck with wonder at the wisdom of the bird.

"This augurs well for my plans to get close to Damayanti," he thought, and gently took the swan with him to the palace.

In the palace, the king had a room specially decorated for the swan. There, Nala enjoyed its company, asking the swan for advice and telling it his troubles. The swan spoke little in reply, but its few words were full of wit and wisdom. Nala waited for the right time to seek the swan's help in his mission.

The swan soon discovered that in spite of wealth and fame, Nala was an unhappy king.

One day, the wise bird asked, "Your Majesty, I find your country one of the most prosperous and well-administered. Your subjects enjoy peace and comfort. But I cannot find happiness in you. You seem to be missing something important in your life. Please feel free to tell me. I can suggest ways of removing your sorrows."

Nala was touched by the swan's words.

"You are right. Happiness does not follow if one possesses wealth and fame. I have heard about Damayanti, the charming princess of the neighbouring kingdom, the daughter of King Bheema. I have not met her but my heart is set on marrying her. But how do I inform her of my love and how am I to know whether she loves me?" asked Nala.

"You Majesty," replied the swan, "you need have no anxieties over this matter. Leave it to me. I shall convey your feelings to Princess Damayanti

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and return to you with happy tidings."

Soon the swan took off and reached the royal garden of Princess Damayanti. The clever bird soon managed to find her, and spoke to her sweet words about Nala, the great king of Nishada.

The extraordinarily attractive swan with its charming conversation made Damayanti feel an inexplicable bond with the bird. The swan did not protest when the beautiful princess gently patted its feathers and took the bird in her hands. Damayanti was curious to know more about Nala. The swan was only too happy to tell her.

"Fair Princess, King Nala, the ruler of Nishada, has no equal anywhere," it said. "He is not only extremely handsome but is a just and kind human being. Some of his qualities are the envy of even the gods. I know he loves you dearly and desires to know your mind!"

Damayanti, who had earlier heard about Nala's greatness, was now utterly convinced that he and only he should be her husband.

The swan told Damayanti about the goodness of Nala

"O sweet swan," she said, "you are indeed a divine messenger. I am impressed by your words. Please convey to King Nala that I am equally in love with him and will marry only him."

The swan replied, "O Princess! You are fortunate. May God bless you and Nala with marital bliss. I shall convey this happy news to him, as he is eagerly awaiting me in his palace."

The swan flew to Nishada and met Nala, who was restlessly waiting to know the result of the visit.

"Good news, Your Majesty!" began the swan, instantly bringing cheer to the depressed king. "Damayanti loves you as much as you love her and has told me that she will marry you and no other. Please give up your worries and wait for the opportunity, which will soon present itself. May God bless you and Damayanti! May I now take leave of you, O Noble King, and return to my companions?"

The king gladly consented to the swan's wish.

"I have no words to thank you for what you have done," he said. "Both Damayanti and I are deeply

indebted to you. If we could be of help to you at any time, please do not hesitate to ask me. I will remember you with deep gratitude to the end of my life." So saying, King Nala let the swan return to its home.

King Bheema in the meantime began to organize a *swayamvara* for his daughter Damayanti. A princess in ancient India had the wisdom and ability to choose her own husband. For this purpose, her father, the king, would hold an assembly to which eligible princes from far and near would be invited to attend. The ritual involved the princes being introduced to each one who was present, highlighting the person's talents and achievements. A healthy tradition had been established by which the assembled princes accepted the decision of the princess. Jealousies and disappointments among those who did not win the hand of the princess were normally not exhibited.

True to tradition, Damayanti was getting organized for her *swayamvara*. She made sure that the guest list included Nala, whom she had already identified as her bridegroom. Nala duly received the invitation that he was eagerly looking forward to.

The excited king could hardly conceal his happiness. Without losing time, he communicated his consent and acceptance of the invitation to King Bheema. He knew he had only passed the first step towards his goal. He prayed to God for his success in the *swayamvara.*

Summoning his minister, Nala said, "Arrange for my visit to King Bheema's palace. Get the chariot and best horses and let the decoration be of our highest standard."

The minister guessed his king's anxiety that the journey should be comfortable. The minister in turn called his staff and assigned them duties. To one of them he said, "Look, our king is scheduled to attend the *swayamvara* of Princess Damayanti. Get the gold-plated chariot and the new horses." To another, he ordered, "The royal robes for our king should be the finest, befitting the occasion." To a third, the order was "Ensure that rest-houses on the way are well-equipped to enable the king to have proper rest and refreshments."

In time, Nala commenced his journey in style and elegance. As expected, a large number of princes headed towards the venue of the *swayamvara*, most of whom were quite nervous. After all, Nala's fame had travelled far and wide, and the princes knew that his participation would lessen their chances. To complicate matters, the gods from Indra's abode wished to witness the important event. So two of them set off for King Bheema's court.

The guests and other nobles assembled at the time fixed for the *swayamvara.* As the invitees started arriving, King Bheema personally received everyone.

The minister in charge of the event announced, "'Noble Princes! On behalf of His Highness, King Bheema, I welcome every one of you. Princess Damayanti will soon be meeting you. The family background and qualifications of every prince will be made known to her. The final decision will rest with the princess alone. She will garland the person she chooses."

Following the announcement, Damayanti entered the assembly accompanied by her aides and

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the formal introduction of guests commenced.

In the meantime, the two celestials arrived. One of them said to the other, "Let us test the resourcefulness of the princess. How do we go about it?"

Replied the other, "Let us both position ourselves next to Nala and disguise ourselves to look exactly like him. This should baffle even the clever princess!"

"Fine," agreed the first, "let us proceed."

They moved about unobserved and managed to find space next to Nala. They also ensured that none other than Damayanti and her aides would see them.

The exquisite and charming Damayanti, dressed splendidly for the occasion, moved slowly from prince to prince, listening intently to the elaborate introduction of each guest. She held a garland specially designed for the occasion, which she would place around the neck of her chosen bridegroom.

She prayed, "O God, help me wed Nala and none else."

By then, she had approached Nala himself. As

Damayanti approached Nala to garland him

the introduction was about to commence, Damayanti and her aides were stunned at the strange spectacle of three identical-looking people in the place reserved for King Nala. She knew that the one she loved dearly was among the three.

"Good Heavens! Is destiny preventing my earnest desire from being fulfilled?" thought Damayanti, and turned to her aides. Regaining her composure soon, the princess took the obvious step. "O God, if my love is pure and deep, do guide me in this critical moment," said she softly to herself. She looked up as her inner voice said reassuringly, "You will have the wisdom to identify the correct one. Only – watch their movements closely..."

Damayanti was quick to note rather unnatural signs in two of the threesome. The celestials masquerading as Nala had their eyes always open, never batted eyelids, never winked. This would not be possible for humans. She further noticed that their feet were not resting on the ground, a sure sign that they were celestial beings.

Damayanti whispered to her aides, smiled, and lost no time in garlanding the real Nala, thus formally concluding her *swaymavara.* King Bheema congratulated his son-in-law warmly. He was most happy with his daughter's choice. The wedding ceremony was held according to the best tradition. After the wedding, King Bheema, shedding tears of joy, arranged for his daughter to return to Nishada with Nala, accompanied by rich gifts.

The celestial visitors blessed the couple and granted two boons to Nala-excellence in driving chariots and in culinary skills.

Leading a life of extreme happiness, the noble king did not see how his wicked brother was keeping himself engaged. His trusted minister said to him, "Your Majesty, we hear that Prince Pushkara is neglecting his duties and seems to be guided by men of doubtful character."

Nala disagreed. "No, my revered minister," he said, "Pushkara is by nature easy-going, and I do not wish to burden him with heavy responsibilities. Do not worry about him."

Meantime, Pushkara was actively plotting with his henchmen.

"I must wrest power from Nala," he said to them. "He seems to be having everything he wants. He rules over a prosperous country and has managed to win the most beautiful princess in all the world. What abilities has he which I do not possess?" bemoaned the evil prince.

His principal adviser cautioned him.

"Please do not act in haste. He has the subjects on his side. Therefore we cannot easily dethrone him."

"What do we do then, put up with the life of slaves and obey orders?" fumed Pushkara.

"No," replied his friend, "we must plan a strategy. You must strike at his weak point. I know he is mad about gambling although he seems to have restrained himself after marriage. Maybe Damayanti is influencing him too much. Therefore, be clever, get closer to your brother and gently tempt him to a game. Leave the rest to me and my friends."

Pushkara agreed and went to meet his brother.

"Dear brother," he said, "it is becoming difficult even to meet you these days. Are you forgetting me?"

The simple and honest Nala was touched.

"Never, my dear Pushkara, I continue to love you as before. Is there anything I can do for you? Are you happy?"

"No, my brother," said Pushkara. "I need nothing but your continued affection. We have not spent any time together for the last couple of years. Why don't you give me the pleasure of your company over our favorite game - you know what it is!"

This was enough to tempt Nala. He said, "We will certainly play it tomorrow."

Everyone knew that success in gambling was not from competence but either due to luck or deceit. Although such games with wagers were undesirable and undignified, many kings indulged in such amusements and some became miserable thereafter. Nala, too, had this weakness and when he casually mentioned that he was meeting his brother the following day to Damayanti, she counselled, "Dear

one, please spend as much time as you want with Pushkara. Let him not feel ignored. But why this gambling game? I am skeptical about such amusements as they can lead to disaster."

"Do not worry, dear Damayanti," Nala reassured her. "We have had games even earlier. Let me spend just a day with him."

The following day, Damayanti felt worried and uncertain.

"Why is it I am not my usual self today? Something seems to be troubling me, and the mind refuses to let me be in peace. I hope King Nala will have no problems." So went her thoughts.

Pushkara gave his brother a tremendous welcome in his palace and spread out a feast before him.

"Dear brother," he said, "is my sister-in-law keeping well? How are the two children? Haven't seen them for last several days."

Nala made similar enquires about Pushkara but carefully avoided telling him of Damayanti's

KIng Nala lost everthing in a game of dice

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misgivings over their meeting fearful that his brother would be upset.

Wicked gamblers adopted many tactics to tempt the weaker ones to stake most precious processions thoughtlessly. Pushkara, as planned, employed the most effective strategy by deliberately losing the first few games when the stakes were not high. This emboldened the winner to continue with the game and offer his best possessions hoping that his winning spree would continue. The mischievous gambler now got the opportunity to employ deceptive methods deftly. King Nala, the wise monarch, fell precisely for this trick, cleverly manipulated by his brother. Nala realized too late that he had lost his entire wealth and even his throne. A deep shadow fell upon his countenance.

"What are you thinking, brother? Are you going back on your offer?" asked Pushkara with derision. He had cleverly arranged for very senior chieftains to be present throughout so that none could openly accuse him of cheating.

"Gentlemen," he called them, "you have witnessed all that has happened. I did not ask Nala to stake his kingdom in my favour. I can't help it if he so chose and then lost everything. Please go and inform the minister and make the necessary proclamation."

He then addressed Nala, "Dear brother, I have no animosity. But according to our understanding, the loser has to retire to the forest for three years and remain in disguise for a year thereafter. If, during that year, you are recognized, the punishment will be repeated. I am sorry for you and your family. Please see your promise through."

Pushkara had thus cleverly given himself enough time to consolidate his position, win over the people, and if Nala managed to return after four years, he intended to fight him.

Deeply distressed and finding it difficult to come to terms with the realities, Nala struggled to get back to his queen and break the shocking news.

"How will my sweetheart bear this shock?"

lamented Nala. "How is it that despite her timely warning, I was reckless? Do we call it fate or an unpardonable criminal act on my part? There is no point in finding fault with Pushkara. Even my minister had warned me over his behaviour. What will I do? Damayanti was bred in a royal household and the children have also been brought up in this atmosphere. God, what sin have I committed?"

A desperately dejected Nala went to his wife.

Damayanti had been uneasy from the moment Nala had gone to his brother's palace. One of her trusted attendants had on an earlier occasion warned her: "O Queen, Prince Pushkara is an evil man, one has to be wary of his moves. But please do not mention to the king that I said so as he trusts his brother a lot."

Damayanti's mind had therefore some foreboding. Nala entered her chambers with extreme remorse, unwilling even to look at her face. Fortunately, she had the necessary fortitude and was quick to assess the situation.

"Welcome, my dear, you look tired. First, have some refreshments and let not anything worry you."

"Dear Damayanti," cried Nala, "matters are not as simple as you might think. I have been reduced to the level of a beggar having lost all my wealth and even the crown. I have betrayed you and the children, and even our country. I had the best of education, training and everything but my weakness for gambling robbed me of my senses. I am now before you, guilty of an unpardonable crime, and deserving the highest punishment."

"Enough, my dear, please do not be disheartened, no problem comes without a purpose. You should not call yourself a sinner. Happiness and sorrows are part of life and these will alternate in the lives of all," consoled the intelligent Damayanti.

'This is not all, dear," said the distraught Nala, "I am required to live in the forest for three years and thereafter live in hiding for a year. I will therefore proceed forthwith after arranging for you and our children to go to your parents' home. I do not have

the courage to face your father who had highest regard for me," said Nala in a voice shaking with shame.

Damayanti concealed her shock and distress, picked up courage and firmly said, "My beloved, I repeat that there is nothing to feel dejected about. Please remember that most people live in worse conditions. One should learn to face any crisis. We will send the children to my father's care but I will accompany you as it is my duty. I cannot leave you under any circumstances."

The minister was informed of the quick turn of events. The people of Nishada were stunned and feared that Nala's exile was not good for the country. But there was nothing to be done. Prince Pushkara had wrested the throne.

Nala quickly left the palace with Damayanti with not even a change of clothing, after arranging for the children to go to their maternal grandparents. Nala and Damayanti wandered aimlessly in the forests. The feeling of guilt and remorse tormented

Damayanti accompamed Nala when he was exiled

Nala, and his sadness knew no end whenever he thought of the suffering being borne by his dear wife.

One day, Nala saw a group of attractive birds and in his eagerness to get at least one of them, he threw his only garment at it. The bird was still for a few minutes but before Nala could reach it, it had taken off with the cloth covering it. The bird flew far and the garment was blown away. Finding nothing to cover himself, Nala became miserable. Damayanti tore off a portion from her saree and gave it to him. In this miserable condition, they spent another day. Damayanti continued to encourage him.

"O my beloved husband," she said, "I have assured you many times that I am as happy here as I was in the palace. My only wish is to be with you in good and bad times. Do not worry about me."

That night, they both rested in a broken-down hut. The deep wound in the mind of Nala about his wife's suffering would not let him sleep. In his utterly confused state, he took the unfortunate decision to

leave his wife and go away alone. He had earlier in the day, repeatedly explained to her a particular path which would lead to her cousin's residence in the nearest town. Nala thought, "Enough of Damayanti's suffering, let me leave her. Only then will she be forced to go to her cousin who, I am sure, will help her get to her parents."

Nala quickly moved away from Damayanti, leaving the Queen of Nishada to fend for herself. As day dawned, Damayanti opened her eyes and, not finding her husband, waited for a while, thinking he might have gone for water or for some fruits. Time passed without any trace of the king. Slowly realization dawned on her.

"God, has he then deserted me in this jungle? All day yesterday, he was insisting that I go to my father and even showed me the way to my cousin's place. Rather than remaining here, let me take that path..."

Damayanti hardly took a few steps when something heavy caught her legs. An enormous snake, a python no less, had caught her. Poor

Damayanti cried aloud in fear and pain. Luckily, a hunter who was not far away came running on hearing a woman's voice, and rescued her in the nick of time. Then, claiming to be a maid of Queen Damayanti's, the sad queen sought the help of some travellers and made her way to the palace of her cousin.

Damayanti's cousin quickly recognized her, and arranged for her to be looked after well and sent a message to King Bheema. Having heard about Nala's stupid adventure, King Bheema was frantically trying to look for him and Damayanti. The children were also very sad with no news of their parents.

King Bheema now lost no time in bringing Damayanti from her cousin's palace.

"I will never forgive Nala for all his foolish and wicked actions. Having lost his kingdom, he should at least have cared for you. No sane person would gamble as he did and even a heartless man will not desert his wife in the jungle," roared King Bheema.

But the noble Damayanti pleaded with her father

to understand the situation.

"Dear Father, you know better with your long experience of life that calamities overtake even the best men and we have no control over destiny. Enjoyments or sufferings are the results of our own actions. We get what we deserve. Please do not blame Nala, whose love for me is unbounded."

Poor Damayanti tried to forget her sorrows in the company of her children.

Leaving Damayanti in the woods, Nala had gone deep inside the jungle. There he saw a huge serpent crying to be rescued from a forest fire.

At once, the kind-hearted Nala prayed to Agni, the Fire God, and managed to save the snake, which said, "I am the King of Serpents. You have saved me from a curse and I wish to help you."

Nala then narrated his misfortunes to the serpent king.

"Do not grieve, O Noble King," said the serpent. "I shall now transform your appearance so that none can recognize you, not even your wicked

Nala saved the serpent King from a forest fire

brother. Go to the palace of King Rituparna of Ayodhya. He will assign you the duties of his royal kitchen and also that of driving his chariot. You will excel in both of these, thanks to the boons you have already obtained at the time of your meeting with Damayanti. You will also get an opportunity to understand the nuances to win any gambling game. With this, defeat your brother at his own game and regain all you have lost. But that must be the last occasion for such games."

The Serpent King also gave Nala a special ring with which he could later regain his original looks. Armed with this plan, Nala went to Ayodhya. The serpent king's boons soon enabled Nala to get the two important jobs of royal chef and chariot-driver.

Meanwhile, King Bheema's messengers had been trying hard to find Nala. The first three years of the punishment for Nala having gone by, Pushkara was also engaged in finding him, but for totally different reasons. Pushkara was keen to dispatch his brother for a further period of exile.

Looking for the lost king, King Bheema's minister

came to Ayodhya. A chance meeting with the king's new chef and his outstanding skills in driving chariots reminded the minister of King Nala. On his return to King Bheema's court, the minister said, "Your Majesty, I was surprised to find an extraordinary person in King Rituparna's service. His special skills remind me of our King Nala although he has no resemblance at all to him."

Damayanti heard this and decided to get the man to her palace at any cost. Accordingly, a minister from King Bheema went to meet King Rituparna announcing a second *swayamvara* for Damayanti to be held in two days. King Rituparna decided to take a chance, summoned his expert chariot-driver and told him, "Look, here is a chance to demonstrate your skill. I have to be in King Bheema's court the day after tomorrow by daybreak as his daughter Damayanti is holding a *swayamvara*. You know her husband deserted her in the forest. Get ready quickly."

Nala was overwhelmed with sorrow but was

determined to attend the event. He chose the best horses and started on the journey with King Rituparna.

"Why don't you teach me some of the skills in driving the chariot? You are indeed a master in this art," said Rituparna.

"Your Majesty, we will rest for a while on the journey when I shall demonstrate to you certain nuances in this art. In return, Your Majesty, would you tell me some of the secrets with which some people always gamble successfully?" asked Nala.

"Of course," said the king.

Soon, the two exchanged notes on the secrets of both chariot-driving and gambling. At the court of King Bheema, there appeared to be no special arrangements for a *swayamvara*. In fact, it looked as if no such ceremony was planned. King Bheema greeted King Rituparna but the latter did not want further embarrassment by enquiring about a *swayamvara*. Perhaps the information was wrong. Being a person of dignity, Rituparna stayed silent.

Damayanti was surprised that the chariot-driver was her husband

Meanwhile, Nala, who was in disguise, being familiar with the palace, met his children and kissed them in both joy and sorrow. Damayanti secretly observed this and immediately presented herself before the visitor.

"Please promise to speak the truth. May I know who you are?" she asked.

The sudden meeting with his dear wife was too much for Nala He used the magic ring, turned himself back into his original self, and embraced her with tears of joy. Nala narrated all that had happened to him since he had left her and pleaded with her to accept him and forgive his injustice to her.

"I have all these months suffered extreme mental agony thinking of you and the children. Your father must be furious with me. But please, Damayanti, punish me in any way but do not refuse to accept me," he pleaded.

"Darling, you are mistaken. I have nothing but love for you. My father also realizes your predicament. We will put an end to our suffering,"

consoled his dear wife. She further explained that the *swayamvara* episode was a trick to discover hiswhereabouts.King Bheema was then told about the circumstances in which Nala had left Damayanti. "Let the past be forgotten," agreed Bheema, happy in his daughter's happiness.

Soon, Nala returned to Nishada, engaged Pushkara in a final round of gambling, defeated him convincingly and regained his throne and other possessions. The people of Nishada were happy to have their favourite king back on the throne. Once more, peace, prosperity and happiness reigned supreme in the land.

Shakuntala

In ancient India, women were held in high esteem. They excelled in learning, wisdom, self-confidence, faith and, above all, chastity. Shakuntala was one such legendary heroine, born to a sage and abandoned, but brought up by another sage. Put to severe tests by circumstances beyond her control, Shakuntala demonstrates her strength of character and succeeds in her mission.

King Kaushik was a powerful monarch with a strong army. He was loved by his subjects as he was a wise ruler. But Kaushik was not content with his acquisitions and soon left his capital with his army in search of more wealth.

Having gone deep inside a forest, the king wondered, "Where have we come? I feel tired." He summoned his commander. "Our men must be in need of refreshments and some rest. Find out whether we can get some help".

"Yes, Your Majesty," said the commander and left.

He soon returned to report that there was a hermitage close by.

"My Lord, the hermitage is most attractive and the sage there is willing to give us everything we need."

The king was not convinced.

"How do you expect a mere sage living in the forest doing penance to feed an entire army?" he asked his chief.

As no alternative was available, the king decided to visit the place himself. King Kaushik was given a warm welcome.

"Welcome, O King, to my ashram," said Sage Vasishta. "You and your men must be tired. Please accept our hospitality."

"Revered sage," replied Kaushik, "you probably do not know that I am accompanied by a hundred thousand men. I can't expect you to look after the needs of such a large number; can you guide us where we can get some water and some fruits for

King Kaushik was given a warm welcome by Sage Vasishta

my men which they can share?"

Sage Vasishta smiled and told the king, "O Mighty King, have no anxieties about the numbers. We can provide adequate food, water and space to rest in comfort for all of you before you resume your journey."

King Kaushik wondered whether the sage was conscious of the commitment he was making. He thought, "Hermits live on roots and fruits found in the jungle and have probably no idea of the food consumed by people in towns! After giving hopes to my army, if he fails to provide food and water, there may be a revolt as the men are terribly hungry and exhausted."

His thoughts were interrupted by Sage Vasishta.

"What are you thinking about?" the sage asked. "You are the ruler of this land and it is our duty to help. I meant what I said. Please ask all your men to come along and leave the rest to me."

Overcome by hunger and thirst, the king decided

to accept the hospitality and asked his army to come along after resting the horses near the trees. The men did as instructed. The moment the horses were rested, huge quantities of horse-feed appeared before the hungry animals. This was the initial shock for the men, who hurried to report the wonder to their chief!

The news reached the king who received it with some disbelief.

"My men are very tired and perhaps suffer from some hallucination!" he thought.

Meanwhile, King Kaushik was in for more surprises. Well-dressed attendants descended from nowhere and plied them with exotic food.

"Where is all this from?" enquired the startled king but found the attendants too busy making arrangements that they hardly heard him!

"Your Majesty, please sit so that we can serve you your meal," said Sage Vasishta.

Soft music filled the air as mouth-watering dishes

were laid before everyone, along with fresh juices and milk. The king tried to enquire of the sage again but the sage said, "Please eat first. We will talk at leisure."

He also instructed his people to ensure that everyone was well looked after.

While King Kaushik was astonished at the lavishness of the feast, his men quietly spoke among themselves: "Even our palace feasts on occasions such as His Majesty's birthdays are no match for these divine delicacies."

After their meal, the men rested before preparing for their journey.

"Venerable Sage, I have no words to thank Your Holiness for the hospitality. How was all this possible in this forest?" asked the king.

The sage smilingly explained, "This ashram is blessed by Mother Kamadhenu, the sacred and divine cow. She ensures that all her children are well looked after. I have not done anything and please do not feel obliged."

The king was impressed by the humility of the sage but his possessive nature manifested in these words: "O Revered Sage, it is indeed a great blessing that this land of ours is served by the divine Kamadhenu. But don't you think she should be housed in the palace of the king to serve a wider section of people? May I therefore request you to let me take her to my palace with all honours?"

The sage smiled and said, "O Noble King, Mother Kamadhenu feeds ascetics with their basic necessities. When we have honoured guests like you, she feeds them with nourishment befitting their status. A celestial cow cannot be used to serve the social circles of kings in palaces. As you see, we do not use this venerable mother's hospitality for our selfish ends. I hope you understand."

These explanations were not to the king's liking, and his ego was hurt.

He warned the sage of possible use of force to take possession of the cow.

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"Please do not drive me to the inevitability of having to take her by force" roared the haughty king.

The sage refused to oblige. The infuriated king ordered his men to take possession of the divine cow. As his men advanced towards the cow, they were greeted with a deafening noise from the heavens. Fully armed soldiers in thousands emerged from Kamadhenu and before the king could gather his forces, they were overpowered and routed.

King Kaushik stood in total disbelief.

"I seem to have been rendered powerless by some magic," he thought.

Realising that it would be foolish to escalate the conflict, King Kaushik said in anger, "O Sage Vasishta, you may have won this round, but the battle is not over. I will come again equipped with as much force as you command!"

Instead of losing his temper, Sage Vasishta sympathised with the king's ignorance.

Said he, "O King Kaushik, we are engaged in

penance for the welfare of the universe. The spiritual power this gives us is not available to everyone. Physical force cannot match the powers of *rishis.*"

The elders in the ashram told the king that Sage Vasishta was a brahma rishi or sage of the highest order, and that no one could harm him. At this, King Kaushik instantly decided to acquire a similar status and powers that went with it.

In parting, he said, "O brahma rishi, don't you worry, I will be meeting you again! And I'll make you acknowledge that my status is as high as yours."

That very day, the king gave up his throne, began an austere *tapas* and came to be known as Sage Viswamitra. A man of strong will, Viswamitra's penance to become a brahma rishi caused cosmic disturbances in the heavens. In stages, he gave up all comforts and resorted to extreme austerities in food, clothing and all necessities.

Viswamitra was, in due course, blessed with the title of *rajarishi.* This did not, however, satisfy him as he was keen to be recognised as brahma rishi and

nothing else. Being equal in rank to Vasishta was the only thing that mattered to him. Viswamitra's continued penance caused concern to the devas, specially Indra, their king. Indra was worried that his position would be at stake if Viswamitra continued in this manner. He arranged for one of his trusted heavenly nymphs, Menaka, to dissuade Viswamitra.

He said, "Menaka, I have to ask you to take on a human form, as a woman of great charm, and approach Viswamitra. You will have to persuade him to give up his ascetic life using your excellent skills and tact. Remember, he is known to have a fierce temper and has earlier cursed those who challenged and disturbed his penance. So, make sure you do not offend him but serve him in such a way that he turns his attention to you, giving up his penance. Good luck to you."

Menaka had no choice but obey Indra's command. Disguised as a devout lady in the service of hermits, Menaka went to the ashram of Sage

Viswamitra was attracted to Menaka

Viswamitra. She quietly went about her task, first by cleaning up the hermitage and the surroundings. She collected flowers and forest fruits for Viswamitra's use, taking care to remain out of his sight.

"Let me not present myself before him initially, lest he suspects my motive. I would rather wait for him to take notice of me," decided the clever Menaka.

As expected, the sage began to notice a welcome change in the atmosphere. He was only a brahma rishi in the making, not yet a fully evolved soul. He could, therefore, not resist the temptation to acknowledge the pleasant surroundings, and to find out who was volunteering the service. One day, he saw - rather Menaka allowed herself to be seen – that a young woman of outstanding grace and poise was serving him.

"Who are you, fair maiden? What makes you come here to serve me?" enquired the sage.

"O most revered sage, I enjoy serving enlightened

men like you. I consider it a privilege. Please do not refuse this humble offering," said Menaka.

She cleverly avoided saying anything about herself. In due course, Viswamitra was drawn closer to Menaka. The intensity of his penance waned as time passed, much to the delight of the devas. Indra was happy.

"I must adequately reward Menaka when she returns," he said.

In due course, a daughter was born to Menaka. Viswamitra realised that his spiritual powers had been wasted and he should resume his penance with renewed vigour.

"O venerable sage, I came to accomplish a divine mission. Please take care of our daughter as I cannot continue to remain on earth but return to Indra loka."

Viswamitra was determined not to get further involved in worldliness and said, "Menaka, I have been a victim of circumstances and I have no wish

to blame anyone. However, I cannot take the responsibility of running a household. The child will remain here itself. God Almighty will protect her!" Saying this, Viswamitra left to take up the most severe of penances.

Having been abandoned by her parents, the child was given protection by kindly birds and animals in the forest until one day when Sage Kanva happened to come there. The sage took the child in his arms and with his spiritual vision realised that she was the daughter of Viswamitra and Menaka. He took the child to his hermitage and named her Shakuntala. Gautami, one of the elderly inmates, showered Shakuntala with motherly love. Shakuntala grew up in holy company as a wise and beautiful maiden. She endeared herself to the animals, birds and even the trees and plants of the forest. Shakuntala learnt to live in perfect harmony with nature.

Dushyant was the King of Hasti. Young and handsome, he was a virtuous ruler who was loved

by his people. He was fond of hunting and, one day, Dushyant entered the forest chasing a deer. He had reached the neighbourhood of Sage Kanva's hermitage, when he prepared to take aim at the deer. The frightened animal ran to Shakuntala, seeking her protection. Shakuntala immediately realised the danger facing the deer and asked the king not to harm to animal.

"Who are you? In this forest, no animal should be killed. Please do not harm innocent animals."

Dushyant was surprised at the courageous words of Shakuntala. He replied, "Fair maiden, I am Dushyant, king of the neighbouring kingdom, Hasti."

Shakuntala's companions arrived meanwhile. Dushyant learnt that Sage Kanva was raising Shakuntala as his daughter.

"O King, my father, Kanva Maharshi, is away. You are welcome to stay in our ashram," said Shakuntala.

Shakuntala asked the King not to harm the deer

The king was welcomed by everyone.

Dushyant spent the next few days in Sage Kanva's ashram. He took every opportunity to meet Shakuntala and talk to her.

"O King of Hasti, how do you find living in an ashram without the luxury of your palace?" asked Shakuntala.

Dushyant responded, "Certainly, fair maiden, I find the atmosphere here serene and calm. I enjoy every moment here. I have also decided not to harm any of the animals."

Obviously, he liked the company of charming Shakuntala more than the place.

The two met often and soon developed a keen desire to get married. Dushyant could not afford to stay longer as he had to attend to his duties as king. One morning, he spoke to Shakuntala.

"Dear Shakuntala, I love you dearly and wish to marry you. However, I have to return to my palace without delay. May we therefore get married now

in the gandharva tradition? I am sure your beloved father will understand and accept our decision."

Shakuntala thought over the matter and agreed: "If that be your wish, I shall certainly consent to be married as you suggest. But please remember that I cannot remain here long. As soon as my father returns, I expect that you will arrange for me to come to your palace."

Dushyant was overjoyed. "I promise. Very soon, I will come to take you with your dear father's blessings. Here is my signet ring." So saying he put the ring in her finger. The same day, he took leave of her and her companions.

Shakuntala felt extremely lonely without Dushyant. She was often in deep thought unaware of the surroundings, eagerly awaiting the royal chariot that would take her to her husband. Gautami, with her motherly instinct, consoled Shakuntala and encouraged her. She spent whole days thinking of her dear Dushyant, totally unaware of the misfortunes she was destined to suffer.

King Dushyant put his ring on Shakuntala's finger

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Durvasa was a highly respected sage who was known for his volatile temper. While he was generous to those who treated him well, he would not hesitate to pronounce curses on those who annoyed him.

Durvasa was on a visit to Sage Kanva's ashram. Kanva was away and it was Shakuntala's duty to receive him with due honour. When the sage approached the ashram, Shakuntala was deeply absorbed in thoughts of Dushyant and unaware of the sage's arrival. Even when Durvasa stood beside her, she was lost in thoughts. The sage was offended and deeply hurt.

"How could Shakuntala ignore me so totally? She must be punished! Let the one about whom she is now thinking forget her!" cursed the angry sage.

Meanwhile, Gautami's assistant came rushing, fell at Durvasa's feet, begged pardon and told him about the recent wedding of Shakuntala.

"Most revered sage, we assure you that

Shakuntala meant no insult. She is deeply concerned about her future. She is worried that Sage Kanva has not returned and about the delay in reaching her husband. She would collapse if she knows about your curse as she treats you with highest regard. Pray, take pity on her," they pleaded.

The sage realised the predicament facing Shakuntala but said, "I cannot cancel the effects of my curse. However, her husband will remember her when he sees his signet ring. As Sage Kanva is not here now, I will leave and shall meet him another time." Durvasa left with these words.

The attendant wondered what to do next.

"If I tell Shakuntala about the curse, she will be shocked beyond everything. It is best not to mention this unfortunate event to anyone now," she confided to the others who were with her. The signet ring would surely save the situation...

Sage Kanva returned the following day and learnt about Shakuntala's wedding from Gautami.

She said, "Revered guru, we must arrange for Shakuntala to join her husband without delay."

The sage was pleased to learn that his dear daughter would be the Queen of Hasti. Said he, "Dear daughter, King Dushyant may be preoccupied with his duties. It is not easy to rule a large kingdom. That is why he has not been able to come again. On an auspicious day, we will arrange for you to proceed to Hasti accompanied by Gautami. She, being an elderly person, will be able to take good care of you."

Shakuntala accepted his advice. In a few months her baby would be born, and she wanted to see her husband.

Sage Kanva spoke to Gautami. Said he, "I have decided that Shakuntala should go to Hasti and join her husband. I would like you to accompany her. Your presence will be very useful to her in her present state of health. She needs proper care. You may make necessary arrangements."

"As you instruct, revered guru. I will certainly take all care of Shakuntala, take her to Hasti and return in due course," said the venerable lady.

Shakuntala now began to think about leaving the ashram.

"How can I live without my father and those in the ashram? Gautami has been like a mother to me all these years. The others who live here have also been dear to me. What of the innocent animals and birds who give me great joy? Even the plants and trees know me. I will miss every one of them. O God, all separations in life are sad! But I have no option but to go to my husband."

Poor Shakuntala could not contain her feelings.

She went to every tree in the ashram, hugged the deer, and wept. As the date of her departure approached, she spent sleepless nights.

Gautami and others consoled her. "You should not feel sad, Shakuntala. You have been brought up here, learnt spiritual lessons and possess an elevated

mind. I do not have to tell you about the need to develop detachment and concentrate on your duties. We are as sad as you and will miss you very much. But we have to rise above sentiments."

Sage Kanva heard this conversation and said, "You are right, Gautami. My dear daughter, do you know how much I will miss you? I am a sage, having given up all attachments. While I shower my affection on you, I am also aware that, as Gautami said, we cannot be guided by emotions and attachments. You are not only my daughter but equally my disciple. You have studied the scriptures. These lessons will elevate your mind to view things in the proper perspective. Do not, under any circumstances, feel sad, my dear child".

These words of superior wisdom from one of the greatest sages gave Shakuntala all the consolation she needed. She was now calm, peaceful and recalled the spiritual lessons she was privileged to learn.

"O God, I am fortunate indeed to have grown up

in this ashram. This is a rare gift, not available to many. I am sure I could even be a source of strength to my dear husband who has not had the unique spiritual lessons I have been taught."

With these noble thoughts, Shakuntala went about her routine.

On a suitable day, Shakuntala along with Gautami took leave of Sage Kanva and the others in the ashram. A palanquin carried them away. After seeing them off, Sage Kanva decided to resume his penance in a secluded place. He had spent a lot of time in bringing up Shakuntala.

Thought he, "I have done my duty. May God bless Shakuntala with all happiness. I must now turn my attention to my spiritual pursuits undisturbed."

Shakuntala began to enjoy the long journey. She had not visited cities and was therefore filled with curiosity. Totally unaware of the curse pronounced by Sage Durvaṣa, she was hoping that King Dushyant would be overwhelmed with joy seeing her.

Shakuntala was unaware of curse of sage Durvasa

"I must mildly reprimand him for having failed to come again to take me. He should have at least sent me his chariot as I am the queen. I suppose, as father said, he must have been extremely busy with state matters," so went her thoughts.

They rested at well-furnished rest houses on the way. People treated Shakuntala and her party with respect, as Sage Kanva was held in great esteem and regard.

On reaching the approach gates of Hasti's main palace, Gautami sent word that they had come from Sage Kanva's ashram. The message was carried to Dushyant, who immediately granted them audience.

"Something makes me unhappy. Is the king not well? Very strange indeed that he has not chosen to come out himself to meet me!" thought Shakuntala.

Gautami, who had also met the king several times at the ashram, was a little disappointed at the rather formal welcome from the palace.

Shakuntala and Gautami were ushered into the

chambers of the king. He stood up from his seat saying, "Dushyant, King of Hasti, extends a warm welcome to the honoured guests from the illustrious Sage Kanva's ashram. Please be seated. Is the revered sage well? What can I do for you? I am entirely at your service," said the king.

Taken aback at this totally unexpected turn of events, Gautami answered, "Your Majesty, Shakuntala and I are surprised at the formal manner of your reaction. Do I have to tell you that I have brought your dear Shakuntala, whom you married at our ashram in gandharva tradition the other day?"

Dushyant appeared equally shocked at these words. Said he: "What! I do not know whether you have come to the wrong place as you are talking of my marriage with someone in your ashram. Revered lady, remember such irresponsible statements from anyone else would have resulted in severe punishment. I treat you with great respect as you are from Sage Kanva, whom I revere."

Neither Shakuntala nor Gautami was aware that Dushyant was under the influence of Sage Durvasa's curse and was not deliberately insulting them. Gautami felt that the king was a cruel and wicked person.

"He is probably hoping that his mischief could be buried under his supreme authority and that nobody would dare challenge his conduct." With this thought, Gautami countered: "O King Dushyant, are you having fun? Can you deny that you spent several days at our ashram when the revered Sage Kanva was away, that you married Shakuntala as per the *gandharva* tradition? Do you think I have forgotten those events? In fact, have I not myself spoken to you several times during your stay? You belong to a highly respected dynasty. Do not bring disgrace to your ancestors. Even now I am prepared to ignore your conduct if you will at least repent for your statement and accept Shakuntala, who is now bearing your child."

Dushyant now lost his temper.

King Dushyant was unable to recognize Shakuntala

"Stop your accusations. Shakuntala pregnant with my child! Are you trying to blackmail me?"

As this conversation was going on rapidly, Shakuntala could not intervene. She now took over and addressed the king: "O Noble King of Hasti, you have betrayed me. You married me and promised to come again, meet my father, Sage Kanva, and take me. I waited so long. I swear that what we said is true. We do not utter falsehood and do not indulge in blackmail as you charge us."

"I believed you when you said you dearly loved me. Is justice in your dispensation so disgracefully unjust? Don't you have wise ministers to guide you on the path of dharma?"

Shakuntala was almost in tears at the apparently unpardonable conduct of Dushyant. She suddenly recalled the signet ring presented to her by him.

"Have you also forgotten the signet ring you put on my finger?" she asked spiritedly.

Quickly, she felt her finger but was shocked at

not being able to find it!

Dushyant was now emboldened to impose motives on the part of Shakuntala. Raising his voice, he shouted, "Enough of your drama. I have no time for this nonsense. I let you both off without punishment as you belong to Sage Kanva's ashram."

Gautami was equally upset at the loss of the ring. They recalled their bath at the river that morning. The ring must have slipped off of Shakuntala's finger then...

Shakuntala, true to her superior upbringing, realised that destiny was putting her to a severe test and readied herself to meet any eventuality. Picking up courage, she addressed the king who looked at her with sarcasm.

"O great king, you probably feel elated at my present predicament. I am destined to undergo this punishment for no fault of mine. Remember that Truth will triumph. Justice may appear to have been denied to me, but the final judgement will vindicate

my stand. I am the daughter of no less a person than the most revered Kanva. I leave your wretched palace this very moment. It will not be long before you realised the truth and suffer the consequences."

So saying, Shakuntala asked Gautami to return to the forest.

Although Shakuntala could not establish her claim, the episode made Dushyant restless. He recalled all events in his life during the past year but could not remember Shakuntala.

The following morning, two fishermen who went into the waters to catch fish returned with the day's catch. As they divided the catch, they found that a large fish needed to be cut into two halves. When it was cut, the men were amazed to find a diamond studded gold ring. Soon, a quarrel broke out.

This attracted attention of a palace official who happened to be there. He was quick to identify the ring as the king's own. He caught hold of the two fishermen and after due enquiry let them off. The official hurried to the court and handed over the

ring to the king. Dushyant almost swooned on seeing the signet ring, the sage's curse having been lifted at once. He was overcome with remorse and guilt. He publicly announced that Shakuntala was in fact his wife and that for some inexplicable reason, he had had no recollection till then.

Dushyant mounted his chariot and drove to Sage Kanva's ashram. But disappointment awaited him there as no one knew where Shakuntala had gone. He searched for her for days, months and even a couple of years, all in vain. He lost interest in his life and most of his duties had to be delegated to his trusted ministers.

One day, in desperation, Dushyant roamed about in a forest when a strange sight arrested his attention. A handsome lad was fondling a lion cub as if it were a domestic pet. He approached the child and enquired who he was. Hearing the voice of someone, Shakuntala appeared from the nearby hut. Both Dushyant and Shakuntala looked at each other in disbelief. Dushyant fell at her feet and pleaded

with her to listen to what had happened after she had left the palace. Shakuntala felt assured that he was sincere in his words. She was mature enough to see that it would be wrong to find fault with him. Obviously, they were destined to undergo suffering through separation.

At last, Shakuntala became the much loved Queen of Hasti. She, King Dushyant and their son all lived happily ever after.

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The Supreme Sacrifice of Prince Devavrata

Once upon a time, Hastinapura was ruled by the noble King Shantanu. The citizens of Hastinapura loved their ruler for his valour and kindness.

One day, the handsome king was taking a walk along the banks of the sacred Ganga. Suddenly, Shantanu saw a lady so beautiful that he stopped dead in his tracks.

Before Shantanu knew what he was saying, he blurted out, "I am Shantanu, king of this land. Will you marry me?"

The lady suppressed a smile and said, "It would be an honour to marry someone as noble as you, O King, but...."

Hearing her trail off, the besotted king wasn't about to take any chances.

"O lovely lady," he pleaded, "I must marry you! I must! No condition you put forth can stop me from

making you mine. Please give me your consent and anything you want is yours!"

"Then, my dear man," said the beautiful woman, looking into the eyes of the kneeling Shantanu, "promise me that you will never, ever question any action of mine, no matter how illogical or cruel it may seem to you. Then I will be yours!"

Shantanu instantly agreed to the damsel's wishes without paying any attention to what she had said.

At once, the happy king bid a hasty farewell to his lady-love and ran towards the palace to prepare for the wedding. Before long, King Shantanu and the unknown lady were married in a ceremony so grand that it rivalled the celebrations in swargaloka, the home of Devendra.

After the wedding, the king and his beloved wife spent several happy days in each other's company. Soon, a child was born to the royal couple.

That evening, Shantanu stood on the balcony of the palace, enjoying the cool breeze. He was happier

than he had ever been before.

"What should I name my child, the future King of Hastinapura?" he wondered.

A strange sight disrupted his view. His wife, the queen of Hastinapura, was hurrying towards the river Ganga, with their newborn child in her arms.

Shantanu watched in horror as his wife walked waist-deep into the swirling waters with the baby held aloft.

She casually dropped their child, as if it were a stone, into the mighty river!

Blind with rage and grief, the king ran towards his wife screaming, "Are you mad?"

But the Queen cut his outburst dead with a raised hand.

"Have you forgotten your promise so soon, O noble Shantanu?" she asked.

The honour-bound king fell to the floor with a choked cry.

The promise!

O God, what had he done, in his haste to marry this wretched woman!

The powerless Shantanu walked away dejectedly to his chambers. His advisers and relatives had watched the cruel spectacle with open mouths.

Some time later, the king and queen were blessed with another child.

Instead of happiness, Shantanu was filled with fear.

"I pray to god she leaves this child alone!" prayed the poor king.

But that wasn't to be.

The queen repeated her ghastly act of drowning the baby while the whole of Hastinapura watched helplessly.

From then on, the queen remorselessly dropped five more of her babies into the mighty Ganga.

The eighth child was born and, once more,

Shantanu watched his wife walk towards the river. The king decided that he had enough.

"Stop, you heartless creature!" he roared. "How can you kill your own children without a pang?"

His wife replied, "O King! You have gone back on your word. You promised never to question me. Now, I have no choice but to leave you."

As a stunned Shantanu stared at his wife, she continued in a softer tone, "I am Ganga, the Goddess of this river. I am not as heartless as you think. Our children were really Vasus, born as humans because of the Sage Vasishta's curse. I had to rid them of their curse by killing them. I have to leave now but I will return one day to leave our son in your care."

So saying, Ganga disappeared into the waters of the river with their eighth child.

A few years passed, but Shantanu never really got over his past. One day, as he wandered about the banks of the river, he saw two figures in the distance. One was a beautiful woman and the other

was a young boy. As he drew closer, his heart skipped a beat for the woman was none other than Ganga Devi. The young boy was displaying great skill with a bow and arrow. He was so good that he effortlessly made a bridge of arrows across the river.

"What an archer!" thought the amazed king.

On seeing Shantanu, Ganga greeted him affectionately.

"My Lord," she said, "this young man, who is Parasurama's peer in skill and courage, is your son, Devavrata."

Tears flowed down the king's face as he embraced his long-lost son.

"He is yours now," said Ganga. "A great future lies ahead of him. Look after him well!"

So saying, Ganga disappeared once more, never to return.

Shantanu took his son back with him to Hastinapura, and crowned him the yuvaraja. A

new zest for life filled the king.

Some time later, Shantanu was walking on the banks of the river, a spring in his step. His eyes fell upon a ravishingly beautiful girl. The lonely king fell instantly in love with her. Surely, this was a worthy successor to the divine Ganga!

He approached her.

"I am Shantanu, King of Hastinapura," he said. "O beautiful lady, will you marry me?"

The girl shyly replied, "I am Satyavati, daughter of a fisherman. If you want to marry me, you have to ask my father's permission."

The infatuated king didn't think twice about rushing to the fishing village. He found Satyavati's father and asked him for his daughter's hand in marriage.

Satyavati's father was a smart man.

"O King!" he said quickly, "you may marry my daughter on this condition. It will be my grandson

who will succeed as King of Hastinapura!"

On hearing this, an icy feeling stole over Shantanu. How could he betray his beloved Devavrata? Had he not in the past paid dearly for giving in to just such an intolerable condition?

Without a word, the king got back onto his chariot and drove back home. A black despair descended on him from that day.

Devavrata noticed that all was not well with his father.

"O Father," he asked affectionately, "you have not been yourself lately. What depresses you? Tell me, and I will make it well!"

But the yuvaraja received no answer. Devavrata then set about trying to find the reason for Shantanu's distress. He finally got his answer from Shantanu's loyal charioteer. At once, Devavrata rushed to Satyavati's father.

"Sir," he said in front of the entire fishing village, "I am Devavrata, Yuvaraja of Hastinapura. I am

willing to give up my claim to the throne in favour of your grandson. Please allow your daughter to marry my father."

But the fisherman was a wily fellow.

"All very well, O Prince!" he said. "But what about your children? Won't they claim your father's throne?"

The yuvaraja replied calmly, "Let this be known on heaven and earth. Devavrata shall never marry!"

At once, a rain of flowers descended on the noble Devavrata. A great chorus arose from the heavens in admiration of this great sacrifice.

"Bhishma! Bhishma!" cried the delighted gods.

And from that day on, Devavrata became known as Bhishma, the unshakeable. Shantanu married Satyavati, and paved the way for the *Mahabharata.*

Savitri

In this puranic story, the Princess Savitri successfully challenges the God of Death when he is about to take the life-breath of her husband, Satyavan. Savitri's sterling character, moulded by chastity, wisdom and a firm conviction, enables the noble lady to perform a miracle.

The Kingdom of Madra was ruled by a noble king. He loved his subjects. Peace and prosperity were in abundance in the land. Pundits and artists adorned the court. In spite of all the comforts of life, the noble king appeared sad and forlorn. A great connoisseur of music, dance and other fine arts, he was slowly losing interest in them.

The king had a clever minister who had watched the king's moods. He guessed the reason might be personal, as everything was well in the kingdom.

"Let me wait for a suitable opportunity to find the reason," thought the minister.

One evening, the king asked the minster to accompany him for a stroll and to relax. They chose

the best garden maintained for the royal family and enjoyed the pleasant atmosphere.

"Is everything in order in the kingdom, and how is everyone in your family?" enquired the king.

The minister realised that the right moment had arrived to question the king. He quickly responded:

"Your Majesty, everything is fine and so is my family. But, pardon me for asking. Something seems to be troubling you. We have always found you cheerful, encouraging others and sharing your happiness. Of late, there has been a change in you. Could I be of any assistance?"

"You are right," replied the king, "I have every comfort a king should possess. But I have started feeling a vacuum as I have no children. The queen and I are getting old and the thought of being childless worries us."

The minister consoled the king: "Your Majesty is god-loving, may I suggest a special prayer to Lord Savitri. We have heard and seen many devotees blessed by the deity."

The Royal couple were blessed with
a daughter who they named Savitri

The king accepted the suggestion and prayed intensely with the queen. Their prayers were answered and they brought cheer. Although the king desired to have a son, he was blessed with a daughter. Nevertheless, he was happy seeing the charming face of the child. He guessed that his daughter would excel in every field as she was the gift of God. The entire state celebrated the birth of the lovely princess. Generous gifts were made on the occasion. As advised by the pundits, the child was named 'Savitri'.

Even as a child, Savitri revealed her sound intellect, mercy, courage and perseverance. She was exceptionally beautiful and charming. The parents were keen to provide her the best education. Soon, she became proficient in every field including fine arts and philosophy. Her knowledge of the scriptures was thorough. By now, the queen was feeling concerned about Savitri's marriage.

Said she to the king, "Lord, our Savitri is growing up. She is a young beautiful maiden. Should we not

seriously be concerned about her marriage?"

The king agreed. He prepared himself for the inevitability of having to live away from his daughter upon her marriage.

"It is going to be difficult to find a prince worthy of her," said the king.

Meanwhile, Savitri's exquisite charm became widely known. Which prince would not wish to wed a princess of the beauty and talents as Savitri? But everyone was also aware of her superior knowledge of every discipline. The King of Madra tried to assess the suitability of every prince he knew and even dispatched emissaries for the purpose. The response however, disappointed him.

Everywhere the feeling was the same: "Oh, she is too learned, and in every respect, too good. She will not be a suitable bride for our prince" or "we are unequal and such alliances are not desirable." Every emissary came back with such a message.

The custom among monarchs of those periods was to organise a *swayamvara*, where the princess

is free to choose her partner. Eligible bridegrooms would be invited to the court of the king whose daughter was to wed. The qualification of the princes assembled would be placed before her for her decision.

Savitri's father thought, "As the princes in the neighbouring countries are not suitable, there is no point in inviting them to a *swayamvara*. They may not even respond to my invitation."

At this stage, his clever minister came up with an alternative proposal. "Your Highness," said he, "let us arrange for the princess to travel to countries far and near, and meet various people. Our princess is no ordinary person. She is clever, has abundant wisdom and is capable of identifying the right person worthy of her."

The king welcomed the suggestion. Savitri was thrilled at the prospect of going on long journeys, meeting people and seeing places. Accompanied by the minister and personal guards, she began her journey with the blessings of her parents.

"Let me first go to my favourite hill temple before leaving the city," thought Savitri.

She left the temple, filled with peace. Her inner voice seemed to assure her that her purpose would be adequately rewarded by the journey and that great achievements were in store for her.

The people of Madra came out of their homes in large numbers to have a glimpse of their beloved princess and to wish her well.

Savitri commenced her journey in all seriousness.

"I seem to be causing anxieties to my aged parents," she thought, "and I must find a bridegroom worthy of my love and respect. May God bless me in this mission." She never missed an opportunity to pray at many holy places on the way.

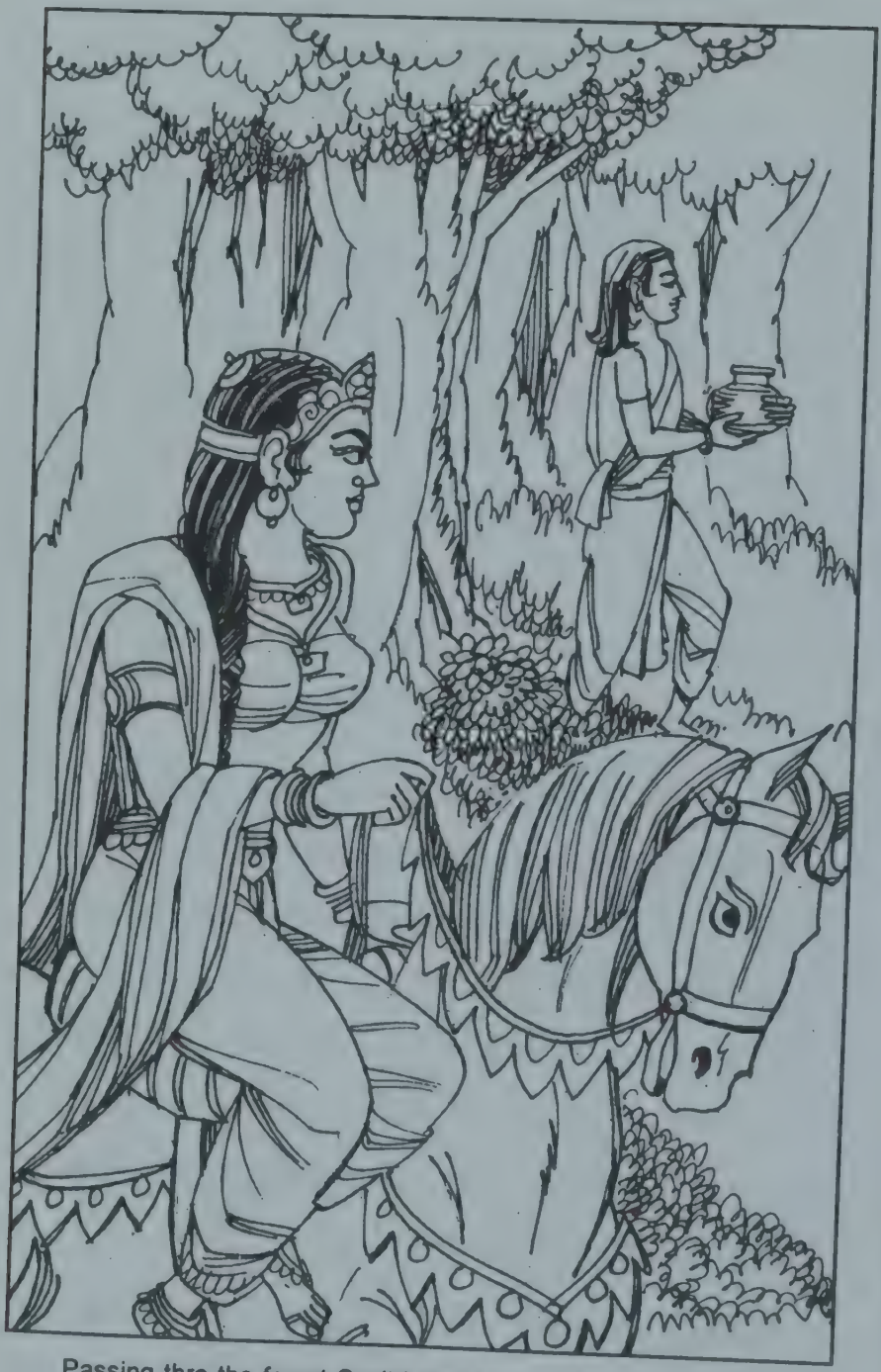
The party passed through many cities, villages and forests. The lifestyle of people in different places amused her. The flora and fauna added to the charm of the land. Winding her way through forests, Savitri

witnessed the ethical and spiritual life of sages and seers. The hymns sung before dawn added divinity to the atmosphere. With her deep knowledge of music, she enjoyed this divine state of living in forests.

The minister, being in charge of the tour, was in the meantime more concerned about the purpose of the mission: to find a bridegroom for the princess. He therefore used every opportunity to enable her to interact with kings and queens, princes and nobles at whose places she was an honoured guest during the journey.

Events in life occur at the appropriate time and place and one must wait patiently. "God, how long are we to travel without any sign of luck! This whole plan was my making. If it fails, the king is sure to be distressed and may even take me to task for undertaking a useless exercise," bemoaned the minister. He was unaware that the turning point in Savitri's life was fast approaching.

Passing through dense forests one afternoon, Savitri and her party happened to see a young



Passing thro the forest Savitri saw a young hermit passing by

hermit walking with a pitcher on his shoulder. His poise and pleasing personality instantly made an impression on her. She was struck with wonder. A person who seemed to possess the marks of a prince moving about in the forest dressed like a hermit, was no ordinary sight!

"Is he a visitor come to the forest to hunt or is he a regular resident of this place? The way he walked seemed to suggest that he was in familiar surroundings!" thought Savitri.

She invited the attention of the minister to this extraordinary spectacle.

"Revered minister, "she said, "did you notice that youth looking majestic like a prince but dressed as a hermit? Could you please investigate and find out who he is?"

Although initially the minister was not inclined to waste precious time with forest dwellers, he had to respond to a request by the princess. He was also drawn by curiosity to find out more about the youth. As the sun was about to set, he said, "Dear Princess,

I certainly will carry out your wish. But as it will soon be dark, let us now proceed for our stay for the night at a place I have arranged. We shall come this way again tomorrow morning."

The following day they resumed the journey through the forest. Having selected a place to rest, the minister told Savitri, "I shall find out all details about the hermit and return soon."

The minister returned to convey this information: "The youth you saw was Satyavan, a prince by birth, not a hermit. His father, a noble and upright king, became blind and lost his throne. He and the queen, with Satyavan, then a child, fled the country and settled in the forest. Satyavan grew up in the forest but is very learned, worldly- wise, good-natured and devoted to his aged parents. He is their only support."

Savitri made up her mind that it was time to return home and informed the minister. She instinctively felt that she had found the right partner in life. She knew it would be an extraordinary and

even unnatural alliance. An exceptionally talented, beautiful princess and heir to a throne seeking the hand of a pauper would be unacceptable. Although Satyavan belonged to a monarchy, it was part of history.

"How will I convince my parents that Satyavan is the only person I could marry? However, I am determined and cannot revise my decision." Her thoughts ran this way as her chariot drew close to her palace.

The king and queen were delighted to see Savitri back from her long journey. They were naturally keen to know the result of her travel. After giving them an account of her visits to many places, Savitri told them clearly all she had learnt about Satyavan and her resolve that he alone could be her partner in life.

It took some time for the king and queen to reconcile to their daughter's choice. The minister also reported everything to the king and pointed out that he was not surprised at the decision of the princess.

"Satyavan has all the virtues of a prince and will be competent to rule any kingdom. If the princess chooses a life in the forest, it shows her conviction,". explained the minister.

As the king was in deep in thought, finding it difficult to come to any decision, Sage Narada arrived on the scene.

Narada is peerless as a sage. Though called the eternal troublemaker, his involvement heralds a period of uncertainties with situations getting complex. Nevertheless, his presence assures ultimate good to those concerned.

The King of Madra hurried to welcome sage Narada saying, "O venerable sage, please accept our deepest respects. We are honoured by the visit of Your Holiness."

The sage guessed that something was worrying the royal household.

"I am pleased with Your Majesty's welcome. I hope everyone is happy. I have already seen the contentment of your subjects on my way. May you

The King was very worried when he heard about Savitri's decision

be blessed with abundant wealth and happiness;" said Narada.

The king replied, "Revered Sir, my subjects are blessed with your grace. As for us, we seek the your guidance, over a matter of deep concern. Savitri desires to wed Satyavan who we understand is in exile in forest living with his parents. We are unable to make up our minds. We do not want to deny her the privilege of choosing her husband. But how can we reconcile to this alliance as Satyavan cannot leave forest life?"

Sage Narada, who knew the past, present as also the future of all events, realised that Satyavan was fated to die a year from then. Not wanting to conceal the bitter truth he said, "O king, Satyavan is noble, learned and virtuous. He is the son of Dyumatsena, a deposed and blind king. But he is not destined to live more than a year from now. This impending calamity is not known to anyone. I am mentioning this to you as it concerns your daughter's future. I suggest you discuss this with her."

The king, already worried over Savitri's life in forest if married to Satyavan, was shocked to hear the prospect of her early widowhood. He used all his persuasive skills to change her decision and said, "Darling Savitri, the venerable sage has visited us at the most appropriate time. It is a pity that such a great and outstanding personality as Satyavan should die young. God's will cannot be questioned. Let us see whether we can help Satyavan and his parents in any other way. But it would be most unwise to marry him. My dear child, I am saying this with a heavy heart and with fullest sympathy for the young prince."

Savitri having already made up her mind, now employed her skills to get the concurrence of her parents with these words: "My beloved father, I am aware that your advice is due to your extreme love and affection for me. In fact, this is how any parent would feel. But please let me explain. You had taken all possible steps to find me a suitable partner. These were in vain. Even my long journeys could find none other than Satyavan. If I do not marry him, it is

certain that I will remain single. Rather than marrying someone who has long life and eternally lead a life of unhappiness, it is far better to have a short period of contented and purposeful married life. I can see no better way of helping him and his parents. Our life itself is short and one should not grieve over birth or death. God has chosen to send souls here and he takes them back when he so decides. Who knows, even Satyavan may be destined to live longer. In any case, dear Father, let us not worry about the future. As my happiness is your primary concern, please rest assured that nothing will give me greater joy than marrying Satyavan."

The king was surprised at her resolve. He knew her nature. Her decisions were backed by excellent logic. Maybe destiny should take its course... The king turned to Sage Narada, who was listening to the scholarly reasoning of Savitri.

"Leave everything in the hands of Almighty. Do not disappoint Savitri. Who knows, as she says, what is in store for humanity," consoled the sage.

The sage knew unexpected developments were to take place. With mixed feelings, the king and queen consented to Savitri's wishes.

Having decided to go ahead, the king lost no time in approaching Satyavan's parents with the proposal and getting their consent. Sage Narada having prophesied a sad event in one year, the king was keen to see that the marriage was not delayed, so that his dearest daughter may spend the maximum length of time with her husband.

On an auspicious day, the bridal party left Madra and proceeded to the forest. In the normal course, if the wedding had taken place in Madra, the entire citizenry would have gathered to witness the celebrations. Nevertheless, the party which went to the forest was large, despite the king's desire not to have a large number which could disturb the forest atmosphere. Neither Satyavan nor his parents were aware of the impending arrival of the royal procession and were therefore surprised and even apprehensive.

The king, queen and the minister straight away went to meet Dyumatsena and explained their proposal. The exiled king was very reluctant to accept the proposal.

"O Great King of Madra, I have heard about you and it would be a privilege to have a matrimonial alliance between us," said Dyumatsena. "As you see, we are forest dwellers, having lost every possession. I do not think your peerless daughter has thought of the harsh realities of asceticism. Life in the forest in no easy matter for a princess. Savitri will not only be deprived of her attendants but would have to undergo hardships particularly in looking after us. Satyavan himself will be away deep in the forest for most of the day, cutting firewood, and collecting fruits and roots. The weather here could be most unfriendly. Loneliness pervades, making life depressing for one who has grown up in a palace."

The King of Madra listened patiently and assured Satyavan's father that all these matters had already

Despite Narada's advice Savitri was intent on Marying Satyavan

been discussed thoroughly in his family. Said he, "As none of the princes could match Savitri's talents, she undertook a journey to various kingdoms and chanced to meet Satyavan. Savitri was born with divine blessings and she is mature enough to appreciate the course of life she has chosen. Apart from all these, O Noble King, you will be happy to know that the most venerable Sage Narada himself has approved our proposal."

At this point, Sage Narada made his appearance and blessed all those present.

"O King Dyumatsena, what you heard is true. You need have no apprehensions whatever about this matrimonial alliance. Lord Narayana will bless the couple."

Satyavan and his parents were now convinced that this alliance was destined to take place and gladly consented. They felt that there was a divine purpose in these developments. For his part, Satyavan was as impressed as Savitri was with him, and was most happy over the proposed marriage.

The forest thus became the venue for a unique event - a royal wedding. With no ostentation, the wedding ceremony was conducted in the august presence of sages and seers. With tears of joy mixed with a touch of sorrow at having to live without the immediate presence of Savitri, the king performed the *kanya-daan*.

Prince Satyavan, as the bridegroom, held Savitri's hand, and said,"You are my queen the queen of our home. May we both live long happily. I shall protect you with all my powers and never forsake you."

The bride and bridegroom took the oath of their being together thoughout their lives. They were blessed by sages and other elders, which were more valuable than material gifts showered on royal couples in palaces. Savitri did not forget her erstwhile companions - they as well as the citizens were generously rewarded with valuable presents.

Thus began Savitri's married life. Satyavan was never tired of saying: "O Savitri, my beloved, have I not done you injustice by making you live in a forest?

How would I ever repay the debt I owe you?"

His parents' utterances were also in similar refrain. Savitri was not a mere 'chaste' wife. She was full of determination, strong-willed, and had the capability to manage any situation and meet any challenge. She assured them that their anxieties about her were baseless. She loved Satyavan dearly and the two enjoyed the sweetness of Mother Nature. The tall trees, singing birds, varieties of animals, the dazzling beauty of peacocks, rivers and rivulets, waterfalls, valleys and mountains covered with mist, these and many other natural attractions thrilled the young couple. Satyavan seemed to appreciate nature's bounties better after his marriage. King Dyumatsena and his wife showered their affection on Savitri, who served them with utmost care and concern. She recalled how concerned her parents were about life in the forest, and felt reassured that her decision was most appropriate. She would bring name and fame to her parents, too.

Days, weeks and months passed blissfully as far as Satyavan and his parents were concerned. Savitri

spent her time in silent but intense prayer to God.

Although she wore a cheerful countenance, her anxieties grew as the fateful day for her husband approached. Her spiritual strength reached higher and higher levels day by day. Her constant prayer was: "God, I have always been truthful, honest, chaste. May Thou help me adhere to dharma and to continue to repose total faith in Thee."

She knew the scriptures. Her thought, deed and action were guided by the highest ideals of womanhood. These were occasions when Satyavan and his parents expressed concern over Savitri's extreme discipline and feared this might affect her health. She assured them that she was fine and they need have no anxieties.

The night before the fateful day, Savitri was in deep meditation: "Tomorrow, my beloved husband is supposed to face death. O God Almighty, I have total faith in Thy mercy. Bless me with Thy grace to succeed in my mission."

Early in the morning, Savitri was in good spirits

and successfully persuaded Satyavan to let her accompany him to the forest to collect firewood. Satyavan did not have the heart to disappoint her. Blissfully unaware of the approaching disaster, he took her cheerfully along, thoroughly enjoying nature's bounties in her company.

Satyavan began his routine of cutting branches of trees for firewood, under the watchful eyes of his chaste and beloved wife. A sudden shooting pain in his chest made him breathless and he fell to the ground calling out 'Savitri'. The noble princess knew that the tragedy had indeed struck and, with enormous presence of mind, rushed to him and placed his head on her lap. She tried to give him some water, which he could not swallow. She then felt an aura descending around her, and a divine form began to unfold itself. Picking up courage, Savitri loudly said, "Who are you? Please present yourself to my vision."

The visitor was none other than the guardian of dharma, popularly recognized as the God of Death, Yama Dharmaraja.

Yama was taken aback at Savitri's wisdom

In a solemn voice, audible only to Savitri, he said, "O great noble princess, I am Yama come to take Satyavan's soul, he having concluded his sojourn on earth."

To the disbelief of Yama, Savitri appeared unshaken, and said, "O Lord of Dharma, I have heard that your messengers undertake this function. What made you visit us yourself?"

"Noble lady, your husband has been an embodiment of virtues and you, a shining example of chastity, truthfulness and a true lover of God. The soul of such a person as your husband is so sacred that I have myself taken the privilege of coming."

The Lord of Death began to leave along with the life-spirit of Satyavan. Hardly had he taken a few steps, when he realised that Savitri was closely following him.

Shocked at the unexpected turn of events, he gently said, "Princess Savitri, I cannot allow you to company me."

But replied Savitri, "O Lord, you know better than anyone else that the wife is the eternal companion of her husband and cannot leave him."

Lord Yama was not going to oblige her and said, "That is true during the life time of the husband. The life span of every mortal is pre-determined and none can change destiny. O Savitri, learned as you are, you already know this. Please therefore return and arrange for Satyavan's funeral rites."

"But, Lord of Dharma," persisted the clever princess. "as the *shastras* say, as I have followed you over seven steps, have I not qualified to receive your friendship and help?"

"Yes, indeed, I am impressed with your words. Please ask of me any boon barring Satyavan's life," said Yama.

Not to miss the opportunity, she asked, "If so, please grant my father-in-law his kingdom and his eyesight."

"Done," replied Yama. "You are indeed great as you did not choose to ask anything for yourself. Now

please return to your place."

To Yama's shock and disbelief, Savitri continued to follow him saying, "I cannot give up the promises I made at my wedding. The place where my husband's soul resides will also be mine. Lord, please do not ask me to go back."

Finding the developments rather embarassing, at the same time becoming aware of some divine force in Savitri, Yama again tempted her with asking for another boon. He had already forbidden her from seeking Satyavan's life.

Savitri now used her superior intellect and said, "If that be the case, Lord, please grant me children worthy of their parentage."

Hoping this would be the end of the bargain, Yama instantly granted her the boon sought.

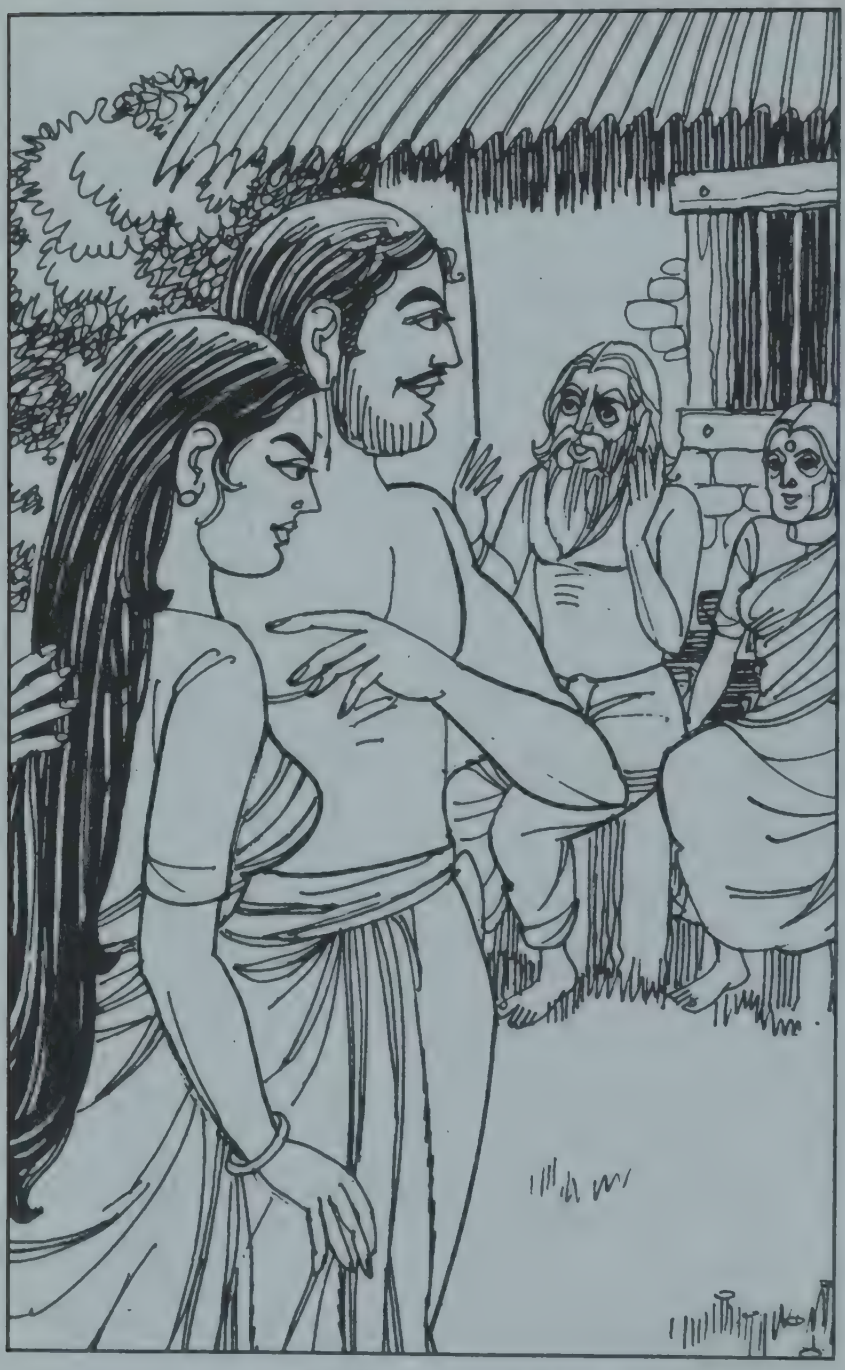
Savitri now knew she had achieved what she wanted. With folded hands she said, "Lord of dharma, you cannot go back on your words. Now at least return the life of my husband so that we may benefit from your generous boon."

Taken aback by Savitri's wisdom, Yama addressed her thus: "O Savitri, you are no ordinary princess. You were born to accomplish a mission and to establish certain subtle aspects of dharma, values and virtues. Indeed, you deserve to have your husband returned to you. May you live long happily and be a model of ideal womanhood."

Savitri made obeisance to Lord Yama and returned to the forest where Satyavan's body lay. At once, he woke up as if from slumber, but with a strange feeling. Satyavan embraced his wife and shed tears of joy when he heard from her a complete account of the events. He could not restrain his emotion when he knew that he had been brought back from death, which no mortal could imagine. They both hurried to their cottage.

More surprises were awaiting them.

Dyumatsena had, a short while ago, regained his sight and messengers from his kingdom had arrived entreating him to be their king. The usurper had fled having been found guilty of various crimes.



Satyavan narrated the glory of Savitri to his parants

Satyavan narrated the entire sequence of events, beginning with Savitri's prior knowledge of his impending death, which his parents heard in a state of shock.

With tears in their eyes, the aged couple blessed their daughter-in-law who, they realised, was not an ordinary mortal but possessed divinity.

Savitri's own parents had, meantime, hurried to the forest, as they had also been spending the past year under extreme mental stress. They realised that Savitri was born to accomplish a mission and blessed her with tears of joy.

Dyumatsena and his party, accompanied by the King and Queen of Madra, returned to their kingdom, and they all lived peacefully ever after.

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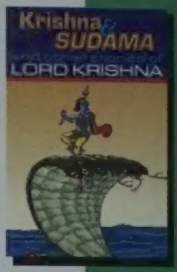

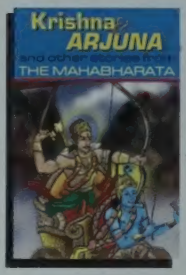

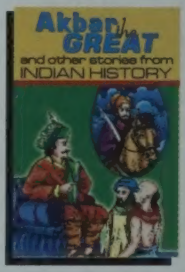

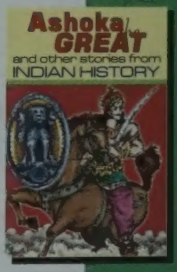

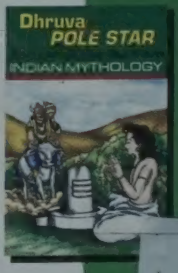

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